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HAWAII AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

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CALIFORNIA CONDOR TO RETURN TO THE WILD IN 1991
AS FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE ANNOUNCES "THE CONDOR IS BACK!"

LOS ANGELES -- The California condor, the reptilian-like scavenger that has soared over prehistoric tar sumps and suburban shopping malls, a bird which has seen both caveman and commuter, will reenter the world in 1991 in the historic culmination of a decade-long effort to save the endangered vulture from extinction.

Today, against the primordial backdrop of the La Brea Tar Pits in downtown Los Angeles, California, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that an experimental release of California condors will be attempted in southern California's Los Padres National Forest in late 1991. The return of condors to their historic range barely 75 miles northeast of Los Angeles comes only 4 years after the last remaining bird was captured in a Dunkirk-like evacuation of the species from the wild in order to preserve it from oblivion.

"By the end of this year, we expect that America's largest soaring bird will once again grace California skies," Marvin L. Plenert, Pacific regional director of the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service announced at a national press conference at the George C. Page Museum, the La Brea satellite of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. Plenert was joined by officials from the Los Angeles Zoo, the San Diego Wild Animal Park, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Forest Service in making the announcement.

"We said we intended to return the condor to the wild someday when conditions improved and captive breeding was a successful reality. Today, we are delivering on that promise," Plenert declared. "We have the birds. We have the site. We have the expertise. And we have the dedication."

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Plenert's decision to attempt the reintroduction of two young condors that are currently being readied at the Los Angeles Zoo was based on a recommendation by the California Condor Recovery Team. That independent body advised in June that two condor chicks hatched this year at the two institutions be moved to a remote release site in the national forest's Sespe Condor Sanctuary in October or November of this year. Release into the wild would follow in December or January; the young California condors would be accompanied by Andean condor chicks.

The two birds that are currently being evaluated for reintroduction include a chick produced by the adult pair "AC-9" and "Squapuni" at the Los Angeles Zoo and a chick from the San Diego Wild Animal Park's adult pair "AC-5" and "AC-8." Both chicks hatched in May 1991; the sex of each is, as yet, undetermined.

Since 1988, the Andean condor has served as surrogate species for condor researchers, who have refined their monitoring and handling techniques on this bird in an experimental tracking program, presaging the day when sufficient California condors would be produced in captivity and available to return to the wild.

It has not been decided whether any adult Andeans will remain in the wild from the experimental project, possibly to serve as "pilot" birds for this year's Andean and California chicks. The 3 years' of study of this non-native species, however, have given Fish and Wildlife Service biologists valuable insight into the daily movements, feeding patterns, and behavior of these cousins to the smaller California variety.

Plenert reiterated the experimental nature of the release of young California condors. "Frankly, we will be taking a gamble. The chance of losing a young condor, faced with the uncertainties of life in the wild, is extremely high. There is no guarantee of success in our business of wildlife management. In nature, death is a fact of life. But we are ready to try," Plenert said.

Recent success with captive breeding at the Los Angeles Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park, which house the world's 52 remaining California condors, caps a decade's worth of research and management by the Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners in the U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Fish and Game, and the two zoos.

Faced with the steady decline of the species, which culminated in its listing by the Federal Government as an endangered species in 1967 and the adoption of a recovery plan for the species in 1975, the Service established the Condor Research Center in Ventura, California, to coordinate field investigations in the condor's last remaining habitat in Ventura and Kern counties in California.

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A program of land acquisition to secure vital foraging habitat for the species also began, highlighted by the creation of two national wildlife refuges in condor country -- 1,800-acre Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge in 1975 and 13,600-acre Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge in 1986. Hopper Mountain will now serve as the base camp for biologists who will attempt the condor reintroduction in the rugged hills overlooking the southern California coast.

After 7 years of research, the Fish and Wildlife Service reluctantly undertook the unprecedented decision to capture and remove all remaining California condors from the wild because of the unexplained disappearance of six wild birds. Whether the condors succumbed to disease or contaminants in the environment, such as lead or cyanide, remains a mystery. On Easter Sunday 1987, on a remote hillside in the California backcountry, the last free-flying representative of its race, "AC-9," was taken from a world that had known wild condors since before the Pleistocene epoch.

Ironically, it is "AC-9" that has produced the chick that may be the first of its species to return to the wild.

Service biologists will follow many of the same release procedures for the young California condors that they have used in the Andean experiment, and which have been successfully employed in reintroduction efforts for bald eagles and peregrine falcons. Following continued assessment of the birds and their development, they will be taken to the release site in late fall and placed in a "hack" tower -- a large, net-enclosed pen, where they will be allowed to adjust to the natural surroundings with two or more Andean chicks and observed at a distance. Food -- stillborn calf carcasses uncontaminated by any pesticides or toxic elements in the environment -- will be provided by their unseen human handlers; a stable and clean source of food will continue to be provided once the condors leave the tower.

At any stage in the project, if a condor proves behaviorally unsuitable for release, experts may substitute another bird or postpone the release. Finally, on an as-yet undetermined morning in mid-winter 1991, depending upon the weather and the birds' readiness, the nets will be dropped and the condors allowed to roam at will, tracked via radio transmitters.

At that point, a bird first recorded in history in the early 1600's by the Franciscan friars arriving on the California shores, the bird which Lewis and Clark noted with wonder in their journals from the Pacific coast, will have reentered the world to a hopefully more secure future.

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Note to editors: A 4-page summary of events in the history of California condor appears in the attached chronology, "Milestones in the History of the California Condor."